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Exegesis of Jude 3-4

## Main Idea and Outline

“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” (*New American Standard Bible*, Jude 3-4)

In light of false doctrines making their way into the church, Jude urges his fellow believers to actively defend the truth they were taught by the apostles.

- I. The Topic of the Letter, Jude's reason for writing (v 3)
  - A) The topic he wanted to write about: shared salvation
  - B) The topic he needed to write about: contend for the faith
- II. Individuals that have infiltrated the church (v 4)
  - A) Destined for condemnation
  - B) Ungodly Men
    1. Who Pervert God's grace
    2. Who Deny Jesus as Lord

## Introduction

You know the feeling. You're with your small group Bible study, and someone states something as if from the Bible that you're pretty sure is not supported in Scripture. You feel a little awkward because you're not sure if you should speak up. On one hand, you want to make sure you're all being true to God's Word, but on the other, you don't want to hurt anybody's feelings or make a scene. Is it really that important anyways?

A church in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century was struggling with the same thing when Jude wrote them a letter to teach them what to do in that type of situation, and exactly how important it is. Imagine yourself in their shoes as they receive this letter:

A letter arrives from Jude, the brother of James. As the leader of the congregation begins to read the letter aloud to this group of believers, they hear a fairly standard and encouraging introduction. Then as the next two sentences are read, and Jude lays out his reason for writing, the group lets out a series of gasps and exclamations. Jude uses such powerful language that after just two sentences they are all on the edge of their seats, anxiously awaiting the details that are to follow, ready to do all that Jude asks of them. They will quickly find that this language is more than just empty hype, and that the situation is every bit as serious as the wording suggests.

Jude has revealed that there are evil men who have infiltrated the congregation. These men would ultimately spread false doctrines among the believers by virtue of their presence. Their very existence would quickly destroy the church's ability and desire to discern the truth of God's Word.

The solution is to contend earnestly, fighting with every fiber of their being in order to preserve the truth of God's Word, and protect it from the lies of the enemy. Such lies threatened to dilute, and ultimately undermine the Gospel of Christ, which all believers hold dear.

## **Context**

### *Historical-Cultural Context*

While the author does identify himself, his name is relatively popular during the time of his writing, and he only qualifies his name by saying that he is the brother of James (v1). This lack of detailed information about his identity suggests that he is the most famous Jude, brother of the most famous James, son of Mary and Joseph, half brother of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> As the brother of Jesus, Jude would have been familiar with His ministry, but according to John 7:1-9 and Acts 1:14, he was not a believer before the resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

By the tone of the letter, it seems that Jude has a fairly specific audience in mind. It could be as specific as the church in one city, or as general as a whole region of churches. However, their being believers is quite certain (v1). Also, it can be assumed by Jude's extensive use of Old Testament and traditional Jewish references, and his lack of explanation of those sources, that Jude is writing to believing Jews.<sup>3</sup> Finally, by his positive language and lack of rebuke toward his readers, it can be assumed that they are generally walking with God, and at this point, require admonition only to defend the truth from false teachers and apostates that had begun to creep in among them.

Although Gnosticism is believed to have begun in the second century, it is apparent from a handful of New Testament books that some form of it was in existence during the time this book was written.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the apostasy Jude is addressing is largely the influence of Gnosticism on the early church.

Due primarily to his apparent familiarity with 2 Peter (he literally quotes 2 Peter 3:3<sup>5</sup>), it is assumed that Jude wrote this letter after 2 Peter was written. Although he is silent on the topic of the destruction of Jerusalem (in A.D. 70), the length of the letter (only 25 verses) and its focus

on one topic mean that it wasn't necessarily written before then. Thus, the date of this book is thought to be between A.D. 66 – 80, after many of the Gospels, the book of Acts and several of the Epistles were written.<sup>6</sup>

### *Literary Context*

- I. Introduction (vv1-4)
  - A. Jude's Introduction (vv 1-2)
  - B. Reason for Writing (vv 3-4)
- II. Body (vv 5-23)
  - A. Description of Apostates (vv 5-19)
  - B. Correct Response (vv 20-23)
- III. Closing Prayer (vv 24-25)

From the above outline, we find that our text (verses 3-4) is in the introductory portion of the letter. It is preceded only by Jude's personal introduction, wherein he identifies himself and his readers. Our text makes up the entirety of the section titled “Reason for writing.”

Following our text is the body of the letter. In the first and largest portion of the body, Jude goes into detail about the nature of the people mentioned in verse 4. In the remaining portion, he details the believer's correct response, which was mentioned in verse 3.

It is important to note that our text will be introductory in nature, and focus specifically on the reason the letter is being written. We should not expect to find many specifics here, as Jude will go into more detail in the body of the letter.

## **Content**

### *I. The Topic of the Letter, Jude's reason for writing (v 3)*

As the reader arrives at this verse, Jude has already identified himself and his readers (verse 1), and addressed to them a generic greeting that has little to do with the specific content of this letter (verse 2). Now in verse three, Jude begins to lay out his message by explaining what he is writing about. This verse also communicates the urgency and importance of the message, and serves to pique the readers' interest without creating an emotional barrier between them and Jude.

Throughout these two verses, Jude is careful to establish and maintain an air of camaraderie by his choice of language. He begins this thread by referring to them as beloved. Although Jude has already alluded to the idea that the readers are loved by God, he now shows them that they are loved by him as well. Already, “Jude's choice of words introduces his deep-seated compassion and heartfelt concern for his readers” (Walvoord and Zuck, 919). By sharing this with his readers, Jude is preparing them to receive his warning as if it came from a dear friend.

### *A. The topic he wanted to write about: shared salvation*

Jude begins by revealing how much he wanted to write to his readers about their common salvation. His use of the extreme term “making every effort” communicates that, try as he might, he could not bring himself to actually write on that topic. In fact, it shows that he did try, and that he tried in every way he could.

The common salvation referred to here is not to be understood as ordinary but as shared or common to both Jude and his readers. This emotional wording brings Jude and his readers

together, being in the same situation. Jude does not attempt to place himself above them, to be condescending. On the contrary, he purposefully maintains equal footing. This continues the theme of friendship by which Jude captures their hearts and attention.

If the readers stopped here, they would be left wondering what was so important that it kept Jude from writing about what he wanted so desperately to write about. Even without reading the rest of the verse, one is given the idea that whatever it says is of utmost importance and urgency. If it was not urgent or important, then surely Jude could have written about their common salvation first, and then done whatever it was that the rest of the verse talks about.

*B. The topic he needed to write about: contend for the faith*

Jude obviously doesn't leave his readers hanging, but he also doesn't abandon his thread of urgency. As he finishes this sentence, he spells out a contrast to what he wrote in the first half.

While the first half of the verse was describing the message he wanted to write, this half begins with "I felt the necessity." He couldn't write to them about their common salvation, because he *needed* to write to them about something else. This strong language continued to build the urgency of his message. This not only hooked the readers so that they would be sure to read the whole letter, but it got them emotionally involved in a way that would make them more likely to heed the instruction to come.

His new message is an appeal. Jude is now pleading with them to contend earnestly for the faith. Now we can see why Jude was so careful to build up the urgency and importance of this message, as this contending is no small task. Jude again uses strong language and imagery with the words "contend earnestly," and the reader must immediately acknowledge that this equates to putting forth great effort. The words denote an intense struggle, which is being used as

a physical analogy of a spiritual reality. The readers are being told to protect the faith, and to spare no effort in doing so. This seems a little extreme, but Jude will not fail to back up this necessity in the verses to come.

The contrast given here is between a nice, palatable, encouraging letter that Jude really wanted to write, and an urgent letter demanding rigorous action that Jude *needed* to write. This contrast further expresses the importance of the message that follows.

In the midst of his exhortation, Jude does not fail to realize the importance of being clear and accurate. He qualifies the word “faith” by calling it “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” Had he omitted “once for all,” the reader might wrongly believe that the faith they are defending is subject to change. Had he failed to mention “handed down,” the reader might incorrectly surmise that the faith being referred to was something generated from within. Had he foregone the phrase “to the saints,” the reader could write this message off as something not directly relating to himself. It is quite plain that “the faith” (Greek *pistis* [πιστις]) is referring to the religious beliefs of Christians as a whole<sup>7</sup>, which would include those to whom this letter is addressed.

Even though the entire New Testament was obviously not in circulation in the time this letter was written, it seems to point at least to the core Christian beliefs. The books of Luke and Acts, and probably Mark and Matthew and some of the letters from Paul were already written by this point.<sup>8</sup> It is also implied that they had already received the Second epistle of Peter. Thus the readers would have already received the essential truths of Christian faith, even though they had no access to some of the later apostolic teachings.

## *II. Individuals that have infiltrated the church (v 4)*

Jude has sufficiently communicated that his readers need to contend for the faith, and that this contention is of the utmost importance and urgency. However, as communicated by the starting word of the sentence, “For,” he now turns his attention to explaining *why* this is necessary, as well as answering an important question: “Against what are we to be contending?”

It is also noteworthy that this entire sentence stands in contrast to the preceding one. The first sentence speaks to believers and their responsibility to contend for the faith, while this second sentence describes a wretched group of people who are committing all kinds of wickedness toward God and His people.

Now to this group which is already on the edge of their seats and emotionally involved in this warning, Jude declares “For certain people have crept in unnoticed.” By using the phrase “crept in,” Jude draws the picture of an intentional, deceptive infiltration. He further describes their success when he notes that they were unnoticed. We can imagine the readers' hearts skipping a beat here as they realize what he is saying, and wonder how such a thing could be happening in their midst! The information of what these people plan to do, and how to identify them would suddenly be very important to the readers. Thus, Jude continues to communicate the urgency and gravity of the situation.

### *A. Destined for condemnation*

Jude now begins to describe the sort of people who have made their way into the church by referring back to the Old Testament. As alluded to above, the readers are well versed in Jewish literature and customs, and that's where Jude goes first.

The words translated “long beforehand marked out” would have struck a chord with these

Jewish believers. The phrase is made up of two Greek words προγράφω (prographō) and πάλαι (palai). The second word is simply a modifier that pushes this event into the distant past (basically representing the word “long” in the English translation). The first word appears only 4 other times in the New Testament, all in Paul's epistles. It appears twice in Romans 15:4, and once in Ephesians 3:3, where it refers to information that has been written down. In Galatians 3:1 the word is used to describe how Christ was “publicly shown” to be crucified. In the context here, the word appears to have the former meaning rather than the latter. When combined, the two words most likely refer to an authoritative document written long ago; namely the Old Testament. In that way, this phrase would put the readers on alert for references to condemnation from the Old Testament (which Jude will describe in more detail later in the letter).

The word “condemnation” here refers specifically to the sentenced punishment for sin. Their specific deeds and attitudes marking them out for such a serious condemnation will be detailed in the message to come.

As the readers heard that their infiltrators were discussed and condemned in the Old Testament, their feelings of urgency would be sent through the roof! Not only had they been infiltrated, but it had been by a group that was bad enough to be destined for condemnation! By this point their adrenaline would be pumping a little and they would be anxious to find out how to contend with these people.

### *B. Ungodly Men*

Jude has already described the basic state of these individuals, but here he goes into more detail, pointing out and describing two of the things that define them. He uses the word ungodly to describe these infiltrators, as well as to transition to *why* they are condemned, or what type of sin they face punishment for.

### *1. Who Pervert God's grace*

First, Jude writes that they “turn the grace of our God into licentiousness.” Again, he picks up the use of personal language to show that he relates to their situation. Using the possessive “our” also shows how these infiltrators have sinned against the readers. Since God is *their* God, this perversion of His grace is now a personal affront.

In many English translations, the wording here can be a little confusing. What does Jude mean when he says these men turn the grace of our God “into Licentiousness?” The NIV, however, nails it by saying that they “pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality.” Walvoord and Zuck write “Claiming liberty in Christ, they interpreted His grace as a license to do what their flesh desired, with no inhibitions” (920). In other words, instead of treating the grace of God as a reason to give Him their lives, these men were using it as an excuse to practice whatever evil and immoral acts their wicked hearts desired. This is a very dangerous attitude for believers to be exposed to, as it can lead to apathy toward sin in their own lives and the lives of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

### *2. Who Deny Jesus as Lord*

Having shown his readers that the infiltrators have no respect for their God, Jude continues to make the affront even more personal by revealing that they go so far as to deny Jesus Christ. This denial strikes at the very foundation of the Christian faith, and serves as the climax of this introduction. One cannot be farther removed from the truth of the Gospel than to deny Jesus Christ or His life, death, resurrection or Divine Godhood.

By referring to Jesus as “our only Master and Lord,” Jude is already defending against the false doctrine of the infiltrators. Master here refers to one in authority, while Lord has the sense of authority by ownership. It has been suggested, and is implied by some translations that Master

and Lord actually refer to different members of the Godhead (namely Jesus and God the Father), but that view is not supported in the Greek. Robert Utley points out that, in the Greek, “One ARTICLE seems to identify one person who is (1) master, (2) Lord, and (3) Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Jude is thereby lifting up Jesus Christ as their sole owner and authority.

This final clause speaks powerfully to the true state of the infiltrators, concluding that they have no place among the redeemed. In this way, Jude brings the introduction of this problem of infiltration to a climactic conclusion.

### **Application**

The primary principle that Jude is communicating in this passage is as timeless as the depravity of man. As long as there are self-seeking sinners who misuse the Word of God, there will be a need to defend truth. Therefore, as believers, it is our responsibility to tirelessly defend the truth of the Word of God, and to be on the alert for people, even inside the church, who may seek to lead us astray in our understanding of that truth.

This principle is most easily applied to those in positions of leadership at a church. As leaders, they are responsible to watch for those who have infiltrated the church and are spreading false doctrines. Defending the truth in this case would amount to isolating those individuals from the congregation (temporarily or permanently), and taking care to address the rest of the congregation with the truth that those individuals sought to corrupt.

This principle, however, also applies to every believer in every stage of life. We must all be on alert for any false doctrines, even when we are conversing with other believers. In the case that something doesn't sound right, this may require studying the Word to determine the truth, as well as seeking counsel from leaders, teachers, elders and/or other believers in your life.

Remember that Jude was telling his audience to defend the truth *earnestly*. This means that we should take no shortcuts and spare no effort to defend the Word of God.

As alluded to above, another application of this passage has to do with studying God's Word. This applies to all believers, even when nobody else is around. In order to defend the truth, you must know the truth. In that case, part of our “earnestness” should be studying the Word whenever possible, and with whatever help we are afforded. Good commentaries can make time spent studying much more beneficial, but don't forget to be on alert even when reading those commentaries. What a shame it would be if we allowed ungodly men to creep in by means of commentaries! The Word of God is the ultimate source of truth, and to the extent we have studied and rightly understood it, we will be prepared to defend it.

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Notes

1. Craig S. Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (InterVarsity Press, 1993) p 752.
2. Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, Talk Thru the Bible (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983) p 501.
3. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, The Bible Knowledge Commentary (Cook communication ministries, 2000) p 918.
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